DAWJ-14

A MIDDLE NORTH RHAPSODY

Those old epic tunes and anthems of the frontier still linger on in our national repetoire.

The romance of the West; the march to the Pacific to accomplish a nation's destiny; the Granary of Empire built on gang plow and quarter section; the ingenuity and muscle of those who chiselled the spiral tunnels with pick, shovel and black powder; dead-straight Mounties who could scowl a Yankee back to perdition and Montana; the westward advance of the sturdy poor, of hearth, home, piety and the family; the escape from servitude and the satanic mills to a land of honest toil and yeoman independence; the frontier of the one-man band, of the grubstake and of the small-time operator; the clamour of those who went west and made it - Bill Smith transmogrified to Amor de Cosmos; the slick progress to power by the tycoons who stayed in the east - Donald Smith beatified as Lord Strathcona.

An amen to Arthur Lower who wrote, "Without 'the West' Canada would have continued to be a 'minor show'".

They were fine, these old, bracing tunes of glory -

"Songs for our Dominion singing,
Glorious songs of Canada...."

as a Confederation ditty put it. But only in their time and place. They do not ring true now. D'Arcy Magee could talk to his contemporaries about building a northern nation, "bound like the shield of Achilles by the blue rim of the ocean". Many responded then, but will we ?

This is a less heroic age or an age which mistrusts corporate or national heroics. We are disgruntled and not so given to official enthusiasms. We are no more virtuous than the pioneers but, hopefully, we may not be so easy to fool; which is some compensation for being cynical. We are unlikely to respond to Magee's Homeric bit about Achilles' shield; if we remember anything it will be in terms of the hero's fatal heel - the frontier as a flawed society, the frontier as exploitation, swindles and scandals, jingoism, double-dealing and hypocrisy. It was forty million slaughtered buffalo; Metis on the run before the rattling musketry of the Queen's Own Rifles; it was flea-bitten Indians signing away their reason for living; the political murder of Riel; the burghers of Vancouver clubbing Sikhs on the water-front; the Asiatic Exclusion League. It was the ominous shifting of topsoil in the prairie wind. It was to become dustbowl and depression.

It ended as it began - with the Mounties. That professional vanguard of the west had to demolish the last of western romance and rhapsody in Regina on Dominion Day, 1935. It was the disillusioned

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sons of those whom the Police had led to the promised land, fifty years before, who were pummelled by authority on that ironic day when Pile of Bones lived up to its name.

These are the doleful tunes of the frontier we prefer to listen to now. The lament rather than the march. This predilection for the dismal lyrics may be only a creeping decadence or a phoney ennui. But it is probably more than that. It is a symptom of a lost style, of a crumbling rectitude and vanished conviction. It was these hardy, self-righteous commodities which built our west and a dozen other frontiers - the belief in the superiority of our civilization, in the infallibility of a technology, and in our inalienable rights under something called natural law. We are losing these conceits of mission and place. We are not made of the same ethical and mental stuff of the pioneers and we cannot be made to sing their songs of praise or to behave as they did.

It is not a matter of being irreverent about the pioneering past, just that so much of it is now irrelevant.

We need new tunes and new scripts, a new repetoire for this middle north of Hearne, Palliser, Sifton and latterly, W.A.C. Bennett. We have to find new words and models, new definitions of what we are and of our ideals.

Canada has a bifocal north. There is the high north of the tundra, the Arctic Islands and the Eskimo. There is a middle north as well, a great swath of country with a southern border at the Prince line (Prince Rupert, Prince George, Prince Albert and south and east to Princeton in Newfoundland) and with the tree line for a hypothetical northern limit. It has these characteristics in common; trees, water, minerals and mammals. Its winters are as hard as those in Edmonton, Saskatoon and Winnipeg.

There are patches of good soil. Fort Vermillion (58.4°) won the world prize for wheat at the Philadelphia Centennial. That was in 1876. Growing conditions at Vermillion have not changed but farm economics have.

What of the future for a middle north ? There is no succinct answer. Middle-northers are a disputatious breed. We have brought down so many prophecies on stone tablets from the mountain that we share only a cult of infallibility and not a corpus of common ideas. Here are a few personal, iron-clad preachments on what should or will happen.

: this middle north is on the fringe of our country and probably always will be. It will be required by the south, and used by the south to southern advantage. It will be a backyard, - a perpetual hinterland.

: it may be a place to keep people away from, to be left, as it is now, relatively vacant. Lack of settlements and settlers in the region might some day make for efficient use of northern and national resources.

: if people move north of the Prince line in any numbers it may be for the wrong reasons - to escape from the cities. The middle north should not become an asylum from unresolved problems to the south.

: however many people go north, they will not be pioneers. The Canadian will not be deprived. He lives in a gorged society and has priced himself out of the pioneer market. He is an unlikely specimen of the language animal to revive those two archaic roots of the frontier vocabulary "mite" and "eke". Those can be left with Susannah Moodie.

: a burgeoning middle north will not assure our independence. It is not the grail of our nation. Despite the Group of Seven it will not generate sufficient psychic energy to influence much our notions of a Canadian identity and culture. The "lone shieling" in the Hebridean mists was good sentimental value. It will not be replaced by a Laurentian ski lodge or a tent at Grand Beach, Man., and perhaps only because no new version of that kind of mythology will be required again.

: but, if, in the south of this country a determination persists to be foreign, different and independent, a middle north could provide some of the substance to finance that will, - to pay the costs of making and sustaining our image.

This middle north could, at times, be at hub, rather than on the periphery, of Canadian events. Its national opportunities are problematical; its national problems are a certainty. The Indians, for instance.

They are numerous in the middle north and often out-number the whites. They are on the increase too. They tend to be poor, antagonistic and antagonized. In some parts of the middle north they do not have even the dubious advantage of treaties. (If oil is discovered at Old Crow, Yukon how and why will the Indians there come in for a share ?)

The Indians' future goes beyond solutions to poverty or questions of law. How will they live - what will be their style of life ? Many will be converted or seduced, according to your point of view. (Fairbanks is to have topless Eskimo waitresses this winter.) Many will not conform or be able to swallow our criteria for success. They will live as Indians; a word now being redefined by the Indians themselves and this will involve us nationally in not just an ethnic variety, but in an ethical mosaic.

Can we cope with this and understand and appreciate the importance of apparent diversity in human aims, values and aspirations ? This ethical variety may be one of the by-products of our age which we have previously been unable to afford - a significant and vital human evolution away from the older, harsh social exigencies of exclusiveness, prohibition, rejection and narrowness to something now more essential to progress and survival; a world in which man, in order to survive, must make room for, and provide for, all sorts and conditions of men.

The Indians are more likely to force us to answer these questions than any other people in Canada today. We cannot consign them or their traditions and values to a Mickey Mouse world.

How will we exploit the middle north - this already slightly jaded wilderness ? It will be a new experience for us. The techniques of ecological remedy and repair now sparingly applied to a fractured southern environment will not be wholly apt for the bush. Instead, Canadians will have to study how to create from the beginning a man-altered northern environment in which man has not wrecked or diminished his chances of adaption and survival.

And, finally, planning. This too could be an exercise with national lessons and results. The old west was Ottawa's show with the C.P.R. and the H.B.C. in supporting roles. The middle north is a complex twentieth century phenomenon; a kind of regional commonwealth which so far lacks any machinery or forum for consultation and planning. Without prudent forethought this hinterland will suffer from hand to mouth judgements, duplication, and, from that great hubris of all frontiers - giantism. Thinking big is no longer an adequate substitute for planning. It is an inherited attitude which may have suited the Industrial Revolution but which will be a clumsy and cramping notion for a looming post-industrial society.

One last point about those old ballads of the west. They were probably a put-on; swollen with bravado and swagger. In 1870 the west was no challenge or opportunity. It was an appalling and unnerving problem. Canadians did not go west willingly. They were dragged there in fear and uncertainty.

This is where you will find the real analogy between the frontiers of 1870 and 1970. And we have never liked prophets of the frontier. They remind us of our agoraphobia. We shot D'Arcy Magee for trying to expand our horizons.

David Judd,
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The future of mid-Canada, or what is sometimes referred to as "the green north" of the boreal forest, has been widely debated in Canada in recent years. Some Canadians see this middle north as a repeat performance of the opening of the west of the 1890's.

This is a personal comment on the nature of this northern frontier written for a Canadian audience today. It is, as well, an attempt to show both the differences and similarities between this and past frontiers in Canada.

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